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MERIDIAN AIR GUARD TO GET NEW MISSIONS

(MERIDIAN, Mississippi) – Two significant new front line missions will bolster the Mississippi National Guard's nationally-acclaimed 186th Air Refueling Wing, Governor Haley Barbour said here today.

"Since the inception of this Air Guard unit in 1939, the people of Meridian, Lauderdale County and the surrounding areas have demonstrated a strong, patriotic commitment and taken great pride in the unit's major contributions to national defense," Governor Barbour said. "That support has been especially evident during the last three base realignment and closure cycles and very helpful as Mississippi made a strong case for a new flying mission in Meridian."

State Adjutant General Harold Cross, who joined Governor Barbour at a news conference, said Lt. Gen. Steven Blum, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, has designated Mississippi to receive a new Joint Cargo Aircraft mission as well as an Air Force War Fighting Headquarters detachment. Governor Barbour has assigned both missions to the 186th Air Refueling Wing in Meridian.

Both missions are expected to be in place by fiscal year 2011, the date designated by a 2005 Base Realignment and Closure Commission decision to relocate the unit's KC-135R tanker aircraft. In the wake of that decision, the state and its Congressional delegation and national military authorities have worked diligently to identify a new flying mission for the Meridian unit.

"These new missions testify to the vital role the men and women of the 186th Air Refueling Wing and the community of Meridian play in the defense of our nation. I am proud and confident these decisions will strengthen our military abroad and improve our response capabilities here at home. This new chapter in the rich Key Field legacy is exciting not just to our Mississippi Air National Guard and those who have been working on this project, like Governor Barbour and the congressional delegation, but to our entire state," Congressman Chip Pickering, R-Miss., said.

Barbour said the new missions could not have been assigned to a better unit, noting that the 186th distinguished itself last year by being awarded the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, which denotes the best units in the Air Force.

"These missions will not only perpetuate the flying mission culture in Meridian but will continue their posture in the forefront of our nation's defense. They will also add muscle in our response to state missions as we remain continually poised to protect lives and property of Mississippians," General Cross said.

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